

New Zealand First campaigns on anti-immigrant chauvinism and militarism

Tom Peters
23 July 2026

The right-wing nationalist New Zealand First Party is making anti-immigrant and militarist policies central to its campaign for the November 7 election.

Despite receiving just 6 percent of the votes in the 2023 election, NZ First plays a major role in the coalition government led by the National Party, which also includes the far-right ACT Party. NZ First leader Winston Peters is the foreign minister, the same position he held in the 2017–2020 Labour Party-led coalition.

Support for the major parties has fallen significantly, with the National Party polling below 30 percent. On current polling, however, the opposition Labour Party would need the support of two other parties to form a government.

There is widespread anger over soaring prices, social inequality and crumbling public services, for which successive Labour- and National-led governments are responsible. In the last five years, real wages fell by 6.4 percent, the biggest decline in the OECD. Youth unemployment is at a 30-year high of 17.3 percent. About 2 percent of the population is homeless and 10 percent are relying on food banks.

In this context, speakers at NZ First's election convention on July 18–19 sought to verbally distance the party from both National and Labour. NZ First has increased its support at National's expense, and is polling around 11 percent. Peters declared that "Pepsi and Coke have promised and done nothing," while NZ First had waged a decades-long "fight against the elitist status quo" on behalf of "the ordinary kiwi."

Such claims are ludicrous. NZ First is a fixture of the political establishment and has been a coalition partner in four governments over the past two decades, which have implemented brutal austerity and militarist policies.

The NZ First leader said his party had been responsible for policies that invested "billions into our struggling regions" since 2017—without mentioning the fact that regional areas have been devastated by factory closures and thousands of job losses in food and timber processing and other industries.

Peters falsely claimed that NZ First had "raised the minimum wage for workers" during the previous government and the current one. The minimum wage has increased by less than the rate of inflation over the last three years, after remaining practically frozen during the last government.

NZ First's newest policy announcement is a proposed \$1 billion fund to conduct oil and gas exploration—essentially a subsidy for fossil fuel companies.

The main role of NZ First, since it was founded 33 years ago, has been to divert tensions over austerity, poverty and social inequality into attacks on immigrants and other minorities. At its gathering, party members lambasted National and Labour for supporting a free trade agreement with India, which Peters labelled a "free migration deal" for Indians.

NZ First deputy leader Shane Jones railed against statistics showing that since 2013 "the migrant population from... India has doubled." Addressing the leaders of National, Labour, ACT and the Green Party, Jones said: "The next time you go to an ethno-nationalist rally to receive a foreign leader, take off your knee pads!" This was a reference to the political leaders' attendance of a rally in Auckland during a recent visit by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

If anything could be likened to an "ethno-nationalist rally" it was NZ First's convention. Giving his version of the racist Great Replacement conspiracy theory, Jones accused Labour and National of making "dodgy

trade deals” in order to “import people” to vote for them. He smeared foreign Uber drivers as criminals with no respect for “New Zealand culture” and declared that immigration was being used “to drive down wages [and] worsen our infrastructure.”

NZ First is campaigning to restrict the right to vote to “citizens only,” ending the current law which allows permanent residents to vote if they have lived in New Zealand for more than one year. A party statement declared that voting “should be a privilege of those who have sworn allegiance to New Zealand.” This could strip hundreds of thousands of people of the right to vote.

Closely connected to NZ First’s nationalism and xenophobia is its call for compulsory military service. Jones told podcaster Duncan Garner on July 16, when asked what the party would do about youth unemployment: “I would deploy more of them into the military.” He said the party would say more about this in coming weeks.

NZ First has been advocating such a policy for many years, as New Zealand, a minor imperialist power, has become increasingly integrated into the US-led militarisation of the Pacific region.

Sections of the media—including Matthew Hooton, now the editor of the *Post*, and the “liberal” Daily Blog—last year called for the reintroduction of a form of conscription. The imperialist powers, including Germany and the US, are putting in place mechanisms to draft young people as they escalate the war against Russia over Ukraine and the criminal war against Iran, and prepare for war against China.

National Party Prime Minister Christopher Luxon criticised NZ First’s anti-immigrant statements, telling the media that it was playing “easy, lazy, base politics” and was seeking to emulate US President Trump, Australia’s One Nation and the far-right Reform UK.

Speaking to One News on July 21, Labour leader Chris Hipkins said Jones’ “vulgar language” was “disgraceful” and denounced “his attacks on our migrant community.”

Hipkins and Luxon remained silent on Jones’s call for military conscription. The National and Labour Parties both agree that military spending must be doubled and the size of the armed forces significantly increased.

The major parties’ criticisms of NZ First are entirely

hypocritical. In the lead-up to the 2017 election, Labour joined NZ First in whipping up anti-Chinese sentiment. The Labour-NZ First-Greens coalition government led by Jacinda Ardern proceeded to strengthen military ties with the US, boosted New Zealand’s military spending, and imposed draconian restrictions on immigration. The Labour Party has not ruled out forming another coalition government with NZ First.

It is significant that NZ First has recruited several former Labour MPs, including Jones himself, a Labour MP between 2005 and 2014, as well as Dover Samuels, Rino Tirikatene and Stuart Nash. Nash resigned from NZ First this week after both Labour and National declared they would never work with him in cabinet because of his sexist comments about a female MP. A number of former National Party members have also joined NZ First.

NZ First’s vicious anti-immigrant chauvinism and militarism is the most naked expression of the reactionary agenda shared by the entire capitalist political establishment. Whichever parties form the next government after November 7, they will intensify the assault on workers’ living standards, the militarisation of society and the promotion of nationalist and racist poison.

The only alternative is to build a new political leadership to unify and mobilise workers against the capitalist system itself, based on the program of international socialism. We call on workers who agree with this to join the Socialist Equality Group.



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